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Thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, for inviting me to testify today. I commend you on convening this hearing on the important issue of fostering democracy in the Middle East and on the effects of the Bush Doctrine in the region. I am honored to be here and to share with you my views on this topic. I teach Middle East and Islamic history at Middlebury College. Prior to teaching, I worked as a Middle East Analyst at the Congressional Research Service. I was born in Egypt, have lived in the region, and have traveled extensively in the area.

In his February State of the Union address, President Bush reiterated the administration's commitment to promoting democracy in the Middle East. He noted that "because democracies respect their own people and their neighbors, the advance of freedom will lead to peace." Most observers, both within and outside the region, agree that there is a serious democracy deficit in the Middle East. Some laud the U.S. commitment since the September 11, 2001 attacks to promote democratic reform in the region, citing that reforms will reduce those political and societal restrictions that have led to the rise in violence, extremism, and terrorism. However, the ways in which the administration's declarations and policies have been received by various governments, groups, and individuals within the Middle East might be indicative of the challenges facing U.S.-sponsored programs. Regional politicians and intellectuals alike argue that the region had been moving towards democratic reform long before the administration's pronouncements. Others question the United States' motivation for reform and caution that U.S. national policy interests may not coincide with internal conditions in the Middle East. But few dispute that the U.S. wields unquestionable power in the region and that it can exert its influence in promoting more tolerant and just societies – a goal ultimately shared by millions of people in the region.

With your permission, I will discuss the key issues on the perception of the Bush Doctrine on democracy in the Middle East. I would also like to outline some of the challenges facing the United States in encouraging democratic reforms in the Middle East.

**Recent Signs of Democratic Change in the Middle East**

In the past few months, there has been a growing excitement in the Middle East with regard to the progress of democratic reforms. The Iraqi elections in January, dubbed the "Purple Revolution," were seen by many as testament to the Bush administration's commitment to installing a democracy in that country. The popular protests in Beirut, dubbed the "Cedar Revolution," and the consequent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon have also been viewed, by some observers, as a success for the administration's push for democracy. In February, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak ordered an amendment to the constitution's Article 76, giving way to the first multiparty presidential election, which is scheduled to be held this fall. Some argue that Egypt's move towards electoral reform may not have taken place without pressure from President Bush, who singled out Egypt in his State of the Union address as leading the way towards democracy. Elections in the Palestinian territories have also been hailed as a

triumph for the Bush administration's policies, as have the recent municipal elections in Saudi Arabia.

No one disputes change is taking place in the Middle East as a result of these events. There are doubts, however, that a causal link exists between U.S. policies and regional trends towards democratic reform, and many have questioned the effectiveness of those reforms that have been achieved. A concern raised persistently by critics of the administration is that an election is a means rather than an end to a true democracy. Moreover, many Middle Easterners who are themselves working toward democratic reform are distancing themselves from U.S. policies, citing that any change imposed by external actors contradicts the notion that democracy is a grassroots process. Others note that the U.S. lacks credibility— due to its historic support of authoritarian regimes in the region – and are skeptical of U.S. government commitment for long-term change.

It is difficult to separate recent events from local political developments in the Middle East. For example, the Lebanese protest movements and the Syrian withdrawal were strongly linked to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the Palestinian elections conducted after the death of Yasser Arafat. Both the Egyptian and U.S. governments are cautious in discussing the roots of electoral changes in Egypt; the Egyptian government maintains that reform is a consequence of its mounting efforts over the past several years at political and legal changes. Finally, any links between U.S. policies and municipal elections in Saudi Arabia are paradoxical, as election results confirmed the widespread support of conservative Muslim clerics in Saudi society, many of whom are fiercely critical of U.S. intervention in the region.

### **Islam and the Democratization of the Middle East**

The outcome of the Saudi municipal elections has brought to the fore, once again, arguments concerning the relationship between democratic reform in the Middle East and the rising power of Islamic-oriented groups. There are doubts that promoting democratic principles in the region, as advocated by the Bush Doctrine, would curb the rise of terrorism by allowing long disenfranchised groups, including extremists, a vehicle for meaningful political expression. By singling out political repression as the root of militancy, this argument overlooks some of the other causes of Islamic radicalism, which are complex and multifaceted, but include educational, socio-economic, and personal factors. Moreover, some observers have cautioned that promoting democracy in this region is incompatible with U.S. national security objectives. They argue that there is a high level of support for Islamist leaders among voting populations in the Middle East, and, in most countries of the region, transparent democratic elections held today would almost certainly produce radical fundamentalist regimes that would then seek to undermine U.S. regional interests. This is an argument echoed by a number of political leaders in the Middle East, who warn that rapid political change would create disorder and chaos, a situation that is at odds with historical and current U.S. goals in that area of the world.

At the heart of many of these discussions is an important question: are Islam and democracy compatible? The relationship between Islam and democracy is a complex question that would be difficult to address in this brief statement. But I would like to summarize to the Committee some considerations that I believe are relevant to this question.

First, in Islam, as with other religions, there are those who interpret a belief system as just, tolerant, and democratic and there are those who utilize religion to justify oppression, violence, and intolerance. Many Muslims resent the insinuation that Islam and democracy are intrinsically incompatible, arguing that basic Islamic teachings are well-suited to ideas of justice, equality, freedom, and tolerance. Democracy, in this context, does not necessarily imply a Western-style interpretation; many believe that it is possible to build democratic societies without neglecting indigenous religious voices. Islamic religious sources do not clearly elucidate principles for good governance, which leaves its texts and tenets open to interpretations that can establish a just and egalitarian society for men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Second, as many have noted, genuine democratic change in the Middle East would likely bring to the fore multiple voices – including those of radicals and militants. But it may also create an opening for what some call “moderate Islamists.” Historically there is a tradition dating back to the nineteenth century of Muslim intellectuals and scholars debating ways in which Islam can engage with democratic reforms. I believe that today moderate voices do exist throughout the region, although it is difficult to assess the status and popularity of these groups, particularly in the Arab world. Moderate Islamists, who reject violence and are willing to participate in a democratic framework, will be crucial in sustaining stable democratic governments in the coming years. Millions of people in the region are eager to have a voice in the political process and many support Islamist opposition groups. At the same time, we must be aware of the limitations inherent in relying on and supporting even moderate religious groups exclusively, as this support might come at the expense of neglecting other voices that do not privilege religious discourses. In supporting reform, the United States should be willing to formulate adaptable policies that accommodate an array of indigenous viewpoints and that facilitate the formation of political alliances committed to a democratic framework.

Third, and related to the second point, a question arises as to whether promoting democracy in some Middle Eastern countries, where Islamic opposition groups are major political and social actors, will result in the immediate replacement of secular regimes with Islamic governments. Open elections could bring Islamist groups into power and such groups might then transform the regimes that made elections possible into theocracies. But in citing the example of the ruling, Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party in secular Turkey, we can see that it is possible to include moderate Islamist voices in governance without compromising the nature of a secular regime. Religiously motivated groups can participate under a secular governance structure, where they bargain with other political actors and become full-fledged members of democratic societies.

Some caution that if allowed to run for and hold political office, Islamist groups in some Arab nations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, might institute Islamic-style governments (possibly but not assuredly democracies). In this context, the application of Islamic law (*sharia*), even if interpreted by moderate Islamists, might pose limitations on personal freedoms that are deemed contrary to Islamic tenets. Often envisioned in these discussions is the emergence of hard-line regimes similar to the Islamic Republic of Iran. But the Iranian regime came to power through a violent revolution that was led by groups and interests – including religious clerics – who cited grievances that included political exclusion from participatory governance.

These debates have focused, then, on the issue of *how* moderate Islamists can become engaged in the political arena within different nations. Turkey is cited as a case where Islamists were forced to temper their political views after years of struggling to be included in governance and to gain legitimacy from the voting populace. This involved gradual democratization of their discourses and ideologies, as well as a realization on their part that they must peacefully engage a sizable portion of the population that is not necessarily supportive of Islamic politics. In the case of Iran, however, the change was rapid, radical, and did not entail any bargaining or negotiation on the part of the religious groups with the broader population. The contrast between Turkey and Iran suggests that if Islamist groups are invested in a democratic system and realize that only within this system could they express and achieve their political goals, they could become agents for rather than obstacles to positive change.

### **Women, Non-Muslims, and Non-Traditional Power Holders**

It is important to note that authoritarian regimes in the region limit the political rights of all their citizens—men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim. But there are significant considerations, which are often omitted when discussing the future of promoting democracy in the Middle East, particularly in relation to the role of women and of non-Muslims. Historically, these two groups have frequently held greater rights under secular albeit authoritarian regimes. Because the current push for democratic reform in the region might allow Islamist (and male-led) groups into major political roles, U.S. policies must also strive for the inclusion of women, non-Muslims, non-Islamists, and secularist groups.

First, many have argued that promoting women's rights in the Middle East will automatically lead to greater democratization there, but that is not necessarily the case. In the current secular but authoritarian Syrian order, family and personal status laws provide more protection and freedom for women compared to their regional counterparts. As a consequence, many U.S. and regional observers maintain that while democratic reform must include the political empowerment of women, establishing women's rights does not in itself stimulate democratic change.

In most Middle Eastern countries, women are sparsely represented in government, although in recent years progress has been made in Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt to increase women's rights and participation. The debate over women's rights in a majority of these countries cannot be divorced from either religious values or non-religious patriarchal influences such as familial, tribal, and customary traditions. In Iraq, for example, women have expressed fear that the current process of democratization, which is bringing traditional tribal leaders as well as conservative religious politicians into positions of power, is curtailing rights and freedoms previously enjoyed by women under the non-democratic secular Baathist regime. But some women's organizations welcome the possibility of including Islam in politics, arguing that it is possible to use the Qur'an and Islamic traditions to petition for greater rights. Other groups maintain, however, that even the most moderate religious interpretations of Islam will still favor males and, consequently, preclude legal equality between men and women. We should be more aware of the diversity in interpreting the role of Islam among women's rights advocates and of the ways in which these grassroots voices can be included in democracy promotion.

Second, there are questions regarding the future position of non-Muslims within Middle Eastern countries where majority Muslim populations are increasingly defining their political identities through religious discourses. The issue of non-Muslims is a sensitive one, since these groups are often seen as pawns of Western powers. In recent decades, non-Muslims have been caught between authoritarian governments and Islamist politics. For the most part, non-Muslim communities find that their personal and political rights would be best supported under a secular democratic order and worry about their prospects under an Islamic regime. Assurances are made by some moderate Muslims, who argue for Islamic governance, citing the tolerance traditionally extended to the "People of the Book," i.e. Jews and Christians, throughout Islamic history. But "tolerance" does not translate into legal equality under a democratic government. In the same vein, if Islamic laws are enacted, this tolerance may not be extended to religious groups other than Jews and Christians. Ultimately, there might be considerable limitations on the extent that non-Muslims could become full political participants in majority Muslim societies, where only Muslim leaders are likely to be accepted.

### **U.S. Policies**

Perhaps the most important question that has emerged from debates taking place in U.S. policy circles and among political and intellectual actors in the Middle East is whether change should come from within or from outside. Mr. Chairman, I do not believe that reform must be constructed in these mutually exclusive categories. There is popular dissatisfaction in the Middle East with repressive governments and with the inabilities of those governments to deal effectively with demographic pressures and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Transformations that begin to remedy major political and economic deficits will be welcomed by many in the region, regardless of whether these changes stem from internal or external actors. Most peoples in the region would embrace change and would support democratic reform; there is an eagerness for increased personal liberties, for justice, and for greater political participation. This does not deny, however, that the U.S. has been long perceived as supporting many of those repressive regimes that have curtailed democratic developments and that reform linked to American financial or political sources is deemed suspect by many. Moreover, to some critics in the region, Washington should first focus on stabilizing Iraq and on facilitating a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before turning its attention to broad regional initiatives.

Despite these obstacles, the United States has an important role to play. There are risks and limitations to U.S. policies, but more importantly, there is a need for long-term programmatic commitments by the U.S. government to ensure the viability of these changes. By calling for democratic change in the Middle East, the U.S. has aligned itself with many regional groups who find the status quo unworkable. At the same time, the task of democracy promotion in the region must have a clear understanding of political realities. Nations in the Middle East have their own distinct histories, demographics, geo-political landscapes, and economic capacities. Understanding these variations will be instrumental in gauging the successes of policy initiatives. The United States can support democratic reform by focusing on the following points:

- The U.S. should encourage diversity in the political landscape of the Middle East. Islamists are part of the political reality of the region. The U.S. should learn more about different Islamist

groups, about their agendas, goals, and popular appeal and should discern their capacity for participating in governance alongside secular or non-Islamist opposition groups, as well as their commitment to non-violence and to dialogue. The exclusion of moderate groups in the long-term might reinforce an existing notion in the region that the United States' rhetoric and policies on democracy promotion are disingenuous.

- The U.S. should be cautious in the extent to which it recognizes sectarian, religious, and patriarchal divisions in the region. In looking for natural allies in Iraq, the U.S. has worked with religious and tribal leaders in forming a new government. This approach brings about political transformations but it might also substitute one set of traditional power holders with another. At the same time, these leaders are usually Muslim males. In this way, both women and non-Muslims might feel excluded from the political process. Democratic reform throughout the region should ensure the widespread participation of all citizens. The U.S. should work with non-governmental groups, grassroot organizations, and civil society in soliciting ways to include women and non-traditional power holders.

- The U.S. Congress should work to strengthen existing democracy promotion programs. Congressional oversight can monitor programs, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), by ensuring that they are signaling the United States' commitment to democratic reforms that are sensitive to local political conditions and to indigenous interpretations of democracy. Our democracy programs can support alternative political voices and encourage increased participation in local governance throughout the region. Provisions in these initiatives must also take into account unique conditions within each nation placed under the collective heading of "Middle East."

- The U.S. State Department should step up its public diplomacy efforts and press for improvements in human rights, political participation, strengthening the rule of law, and promoting freedom of religion, speech, and press in the Middle East. The U.S. will gain greater credibility in the region if prioritizes democratic reform alongside its short-term economic and strategic interests. The U.S. should maintain bilateral dialogues with regional governments, and should advocate reform, especially from its closest allies in the region. But dialogue should be bolstered by a willingness to exert diplomatic and economic pressure to express the seriousness of U.S. policies.

Democratic reform in the Middle East is a long-term process, both for indigenous advocates and the U.S. government. The United States must express a strong and consistent diplomatic and economic commitment to this project, on the one hand, and a willingness to be open to local and unforeseen interpretations of democracy, on the other. Striking this delicate balance will be of great benefit both to Americans and to citizens of the Middle East.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee Members.